

Allies Matter: Creating Safe School Environments for North Carolina's LGBT Youth

N.C. Chronic Disease and Injury Section

Challenge

In North Carolina, 54 percent of HIV diagnoses among 13–24 year olds were among young men who have sex with men (YMSM). In addition to increased risk for HIV infection, sexually active minority youth also are at greater risk for suicide. According to 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey results for the state:

- 40.2 percent of Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, compared to 14.3 percent of heterosexual high school students.
- 38 percent of Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual youth made a plan about how they would attempt suicide, compared to 10.6 percent of heterosexual high school students.
- 12.3 percent of Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual youth reported attempting suicide that resulted in injury that had to be treated by a doctor or nurse, compared to 4.8 percent of heterosexual high school students.

Negative attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth put these students at increased risk for experiences with violence, compared with other students. Violence can include behaviors such as bullying, teasing, harassment, physical assault, and suicide-related behaviors.

Solution

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (N.C. DPI), Healthy Schools program, funded in part through the CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health, partnered with the N.C. Division of Public Health, Youth Suicide Prevention program to create a five hour "How to be an Ally" training program for school counselors, social workers, teachers, and administrators. The training was designed to teach staff how to create a supportive school environment for sexual and gender minority youth. Studies have shown that the presence of school-based supports—such as supportive staff, safe spaces, gay-sensitive HIV instruction, gay-straight alliances or other student-led clubs for LGBT youth, and protective anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies—are associated with a healthier school environment for LGBT students. These school-based supports also can result in students having a greater feeling of school connectedness, higher grade point average, and a reduced likelihood of victimization and suicidal thinking and behavior.

The objectives of the Ally training include:

- describing the experiences of LGBT (and questioning) youth in schools
- identifying the disproportionate rates of HIV among YMSM
- examining the high rates of suicides, suicide attempts, and other self-destructive behavior among LGBT youth, and practicing behaviors of how to be an ally

The Ally trainings, funded jointly through the N.C. DPI and a special grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), open with a video, "Allies Matter", created specifically for this professional development initiative. The video features North Carolina LGBT high school students talking about their experiences in schools and about the difference it makes having supportive adult allies. A values-clarification exercise helps participants examine their personal feelings towards homophobia. Participants review how the critical public health issues of HIV and suicide impact youth, and they learn more about gay terminology and stereotypes. The workshop also challenges participants to problem-solve difficult scenarios that LGBT youth might experience throughout a school day.

Results

During the 2011–2012 school year, the training was implemented in six school districts with approximately 100 counselors, social workers, administrators, and teachers in attendance, representing student body enrollments of about 120,000 students. Results from a post-training on-line survey show that, after the training, participants were:

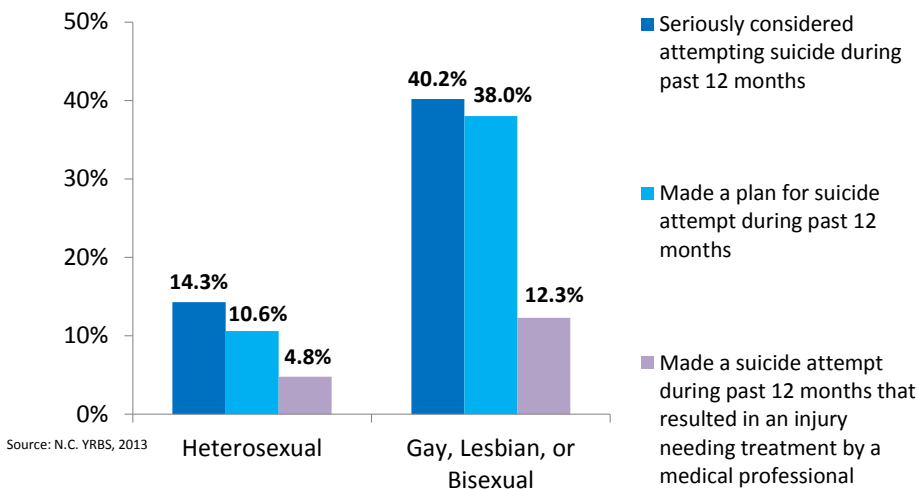
- more aware of the mental and emotional health issues that confront LGBT students
- more appreciative of the need for allies in schools
- committed to demonstrating their support as allies by posting “ally” stickers at their offices and classrooms, noting their availability to students to be their allies

Local TV stations in western North Carolina have promoted the Allies Matter video, further raising awareness for addressing bullying of LGBT students in schools. Additional success of the Ally training program is evident in the selection of Allies Matter by Answer, a Rutgers University-sponsored national organization that provides and promotes access to sexuality education for young people and to the adults who teach them. The video is used in Answer’s online LGBT Issues workshop for middle and high school health professionals to increase their knowledge of LGBT issues and ways to make the school environment more inclusive for all students. During the 2012–2013 school year, the North Carolina program worked with SAMHSA to conduct six new district “How to be an Ally” trainings, designed to reach about 180 education professionals serving 250,000 students. N.C. DPI funding also supported scheduling of substitute teachers to enable more classroom educators to participate in these trainings. The North Carolina Injury Prevention Research Center conducted formal pre-, post- and 3-month evaluation of these trainings.

"I learned ways to subtly show my students I support and love them. I will take this back to my other team members so we can try to make a difference in our extremely rural communities. Thank you!"

- Quote from participant

Suicidal Behavior: N.C. High School Students, 2013



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